



State of Wisconsin  
Department of Public Instruction  
Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

\*\*\*JOINT COMMITTEE ON FINANCE TESTIMONY\*\*\*

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster

Governor's 2007-09 Biennial Budget, Senate Bill 40

*March 22, 2007*

Good morning Chairwoman Rhoades and Chairman Decker. I want to thank you and the committee for the opportunity to join you here today.

I would like to make some brief remarks about the Governor's proposed 2007-09 biennial budget and then I'll be glad to answer questions you may have.

As in his prior biennial budgets, I thank Governor Doyle for making public education a top priority. Many of the Governor's budget proposals support our New Wisconsin Promise to ensure a quality education for every child and close the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and their peers.

We must be committed to public education as the foundation of democracy and economic security in Wisconsin in an increasingly competitive global economy. I believe the Governor's proposed 2007-09 budget, Senate Bill 40, reflects that belief by making some key investments in public education.

### **Global Literacy and Competitiveness**

In the 21st century, our high school graduates need to be critical thinkers, problem solvers, innovators, and effective communicators. So, today, our students must engage in rigorous and relevant coursework. Students need to be technologically proficient, globally aware, financially and economically literate, and exposed to world languages. The Governor's request includes parts of my global literacy and competitiveness budget initiative, in particular World Languages for Elementary Schools and resources for STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math.

These relatively small, yet vital, funding requests are important as the globalization of the economy demands that more Americans become fluent in at least one language besides English. Cognitively, the best time to begin to learn another language is when you are young. The earlier the better. Currently, 60 of 425 districts are teaching languages in some elementary grades. However, because of financial considerations and revenue limits, elementary schools are now moving away from teaching world languages or downsizing to teaching only Spanish.

In addition, Wisconsin faces the challenge of developing an economy that is more knowledge-based. Encouraging a significantly higher number of talented students to consider careers in STEM could be an important step in remedying this situation. The proposed mini-grants and professional development will provide schools with seed money to develop innovative STEM instructional programming targeting students under-represented in STEM (primarily girls and students of color) and increase academic and technical achievement. I encourage you to support these two initiatives.

(more)

---

## Transportation/Rural/Declining Enrollment

As the foundation of Wisconsin's educational history, our rural schools are vital to our state's prosperity. We know that rural schools are centers of their communities, connected to the very fabric of daily life. The school is the community; the community is the school. The fortunes of one rest with the other. Those who live, work, and educate their children in Wisconsin's small schools and rural communities are closest to the issues and understand the strong relationship between good schools and thriving rural communities. This budget offers several proposals that will support Wisconsin's rural schools, which serve 44 percent of the state's students.

As we all know, transportation costs have escalated dramatically, pulling resources for academic instruction out of rural education budgets. The Governor's budget will provide reimbursement increases for children who travel more than 12 miles to school, freeing up vital funds for student instruction.

The Governor's budget also includes provisions from my biennial budget request to help districts better manage local finances and cushion the impact of declining enrollments. I encourage you to retain the low revenue ceiling exemption increases, and the two new declining enrollment revenue limit exemptions. Increasing local flexibility provides citizens and their elected community leaders with the power to do what they think is needed in their schools. Subsequent to my testimony, I will hand out a map showing the distribution of declining enrollment districts across the state which is a graphic description of the extent of this problem.

I also would like to see my sparsity aid proposal for smaller, rural school districts included in your version of this biennial budget. This proposal, affecting districts throughout Wisconsin, can be a meaningful tool to steer state resources at those districts that are struggling with the multiple pressures of declining enrollment, poverty and a lack of economies of scale to sustain educational programming. This proposal, developed by the Statewide Advisory Council on Rural Schools, Libraries, and Communities, was included in my biennial budget request and reviewed and considered by the Legislative Council Study Committee on School Finance chaired by Senator Olsen. I encourage this committee and the full Legislature to consider adopting some kind of targeted sparsity-based aid to our rural schools.

## SAGE/4K

With 25 years of experience working in Wisconsin public schools, as both a teacher and administrator at every level, I know firsthand the importance of early childhood education. As a state, we must continue to invest our resources in the front end of the education continuum, as it is these early learning opportunities that truly return the most for our investment.

Ask any teacher or parent, and they will tell you that smaller class sizes matter. The SAGE program is vital to our students' success because it allows schools to create learning environments that support student achievement and closing the achievement gap.

This fall's WCKE data shows that low-income students in SAGE classrooms when they were in 3rd grade had greater gains on their 4th-grade reading WKCE than their low-income peers in non-SAGE classrooms. Because we now have an individual student locator system, this data analysis is now available to the department and WCER to document the achievement of our students in SAGE classrooms.

The department has contracted with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at UW-Madison for a comprehensive, qualitative, longitudinal study of the SAGE program. This evaluation will track individual student achievement in both SAGE and non-SAGE schools using our new student numbering and reporting systems. Being able to look at individual student data has provided us with initial evidence of the positive impact of SAGE on student learning. Senate Bill 40 protects and enhances our investment in early childhood education by honoring the commitment made last year and increasing the per pupil aid amount under the SAGE program in addition to providing start-up grants to assist districts in starting 4-year-old kindergarten.

---

The current level of per pupil SAGE aid has been unchanged since the program started in 1996. School districts are finding it difficult to afford SAGE classrooms with continued flat state categorical aid and some have had to drop out of the program because of this. All who have participated in SAGE agree on the merits of smaller class sizes and the achievement gains made, but some districts cannot afford the program because of revenue caps and the state aid has remained unchanged.

That is why I strongly support the Governor's proposal to increase per pupil SAGE aid from \$2,000 to \$2,250 and to permit new schools with higher levels of poverty to enter the SAGE program starting in 2008-09.

### **Quality Educators/QEO**

Common sense and research tell us that the first years of teaching are the most challenging in an educator's professional development. Between one-third and one-half of initial teachers will leave the profession after only a few years. Research has shown that mentoring can reduce this attrition and we are working with districts under PI 34 — the Wisconsin Quality Educator Initiative to provide our 3,500 initial teachers each year with a mentor. Thus, I support the Governor's request for a revenue limit exemption to assist local school districts in developing their mentor programs.

Incentives for our veteran educators to pursue Wisconsin master teacher certification, which matches that provided for National Board Certified Teachers, are also included in SB 40, as per my budget request. As is my proposal to provide an extra financial incentive for master and National Board teachers to teach in our highest poverty (60 percent or higher) schools. The districts of Bayfield and Milwaukee would both benefit from this proposal. As would almost 300 schools in 40 districts throughout the state which meet this 60 percent poverty threshold.

To maintain the excellence of Wisconsin's teachers, there needs to be greater parity at the collective bargaining table. Existing statutes allowing school boards to unilaterally invoke a Qualified Economic Offer (QEO) based on an arbitrary percentage increase in compensation does not serve the state's interest in encouraging Wisconsin's best and brightest to consider or remain in public school teaching careers. There is no compelling reason why teachers, alone among public sector employees, should be placed under collective bargaining restrictions. That is why I continue to support the elimination of the QEO.

### **Special Education**

In Wisconsin, we take seriously our responsibility to educate all children, including those with disabilities, as we work to ensure a quality education for every child through our New Wisconsin Promise. Students, parents, and teachers work in partnership to bring success in schools one child at a time. We must help meet the special education needs of our students by increasing special education aid so that school districts face less pressure to continue reallocating funds under their revenue limit from regular education. I am pleased that the Governor's budget provides an additional \$53.6 million GPR for categorical aids. Under SB 40, the state's reimbursement rate for eligible special education costs would increase to approximately 29 percent in FY 09.

I would, however, encourage the Committee to work with me to provide additional categorical aid for special education at the \$75 million level I recommended in my budget request. This level of funding would bring the state's reimbursement rate to 30 percent, a benchmark that I believe we can and should strive to achieve.

I also support the Governor's funding of outreach and intervention activities at the two state residential schools at Janesville and Delavan. These programs help ensure that students statewide receive needed education services if they are deaf, hard of hearing, or blind and visually impaired.

### **Libraries**

In Wisconsin, our public libraries have long been centers of our communities and now also provide high-tech free access to information. Public Library System Aid represents the state's commitment to the role

---

public library service plays in enhancing the quality of life of our residents, in promoting the economic development of our state, and in ensuring our democracy through lifelong learning.

SB 40 critically provides an additional \$1.9 million for Public Library System Aid that will maintain the state's funding level at 8 percent, but still well below the statutory index of 13 percent. In addition, public library systems provide access to the Internet for individuals who otherwise would not have it. For this reason, DPI supports the use of the Universal Service Fund to maintain the state's current support for public library systems.

I also highly support the increased funding for Library Service Contracts in the budget. These specialized contracts assure that students and other individuals have equal access to informational materials required to do coursework, meet curriculum needs, or pursue personal interests regardless of where they live, their special needs or circumstances. The largest beneficiary of these contracts is the Wisconsin Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. These additional funds are needed to reflect contract cost increases and to assure these services can be continued.

In addition, the \$112,000 in the Governor's Budget for BadgerLink will allow us to continue our present level of services.

Statewide contracts provide savings in both time and money. The cost of purchase under state contracts results in savings of at least \$66 million to Wisconsin citizens, compared to what would be spent if each library contracted separately for the services.

### **Other Items**

Wisconsin has a long history of embracing and educating our newest immigrants. We are experiencing a rapid increase in students with limited-English proficiency, most recently, with school districts stepping forward to teach our new Hmong residents. In addition, PK-12 Latino enrollment is projected to double over the next 10 years, increasing by 60,000. Many of these students may need English-Language Learner (ELL) services. Over an estimated 27,000 ELL students are served by our current bilingual-bicultural aid program.

In the last ten years, the number of ELL students being served has doubled and the number of districts required to have a program has increased as well. Given these increases, the state cannot back further away from its responsibility to help districts fund their ELL programs. Therefore, I support the Governor's proposal to maintain bilingual-bicultural aid at 12 percent over the next biennium. And, as with Special Education aid, I would like to work with the Committee to see if we can find ways to bolster the state's funding for bilingual programs beyond what was provided in the Governor's budget.

We must also look to the effects of poverty on student learning. Family poverty rates have been increasing in recent years. Good health and nutrition affects a student's behavior, attendance, and test scores. Surveys indicate that cost is still a barrier to breakfast participation. A hungry child cannot learn. The Governor and I have both proposed to increase our school breakfast aid reimbursement from 10 to 15 cents for voluntary breakfast programs. I would also like to work with the legislature to find the \$726,000 GPR over the biennium needed to fully-fund the state's school day milk program which is currently being paid at less than 80 percent of authorized levels.

I also endorse the additional GPR provided in SB 40 to support and fulfill the department's responsibility under state law to administer and contract for the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE).

Education leaders around the state do our best to plan and be prepared. Finance, curriculum, accountability – it's all a part of the job, everyday. And then there are the issues for which we plan and prepare – hoping we will never have to deal with them. I'm talking about school, student, and faculty safety.

---

The Governor recommends providing a new revenue limit exemption to schools for costs associated with implementing school safety measures. This additional, voluntary, flexibility – leveraging other community resources - is a wise option to provide school boards a tool to help address local school safety needs and I encourage you to adopt it. I would also encourage the Committee to make our state's K-8 school districts eligible for this exemption as well; as currently drafted, the option would only be available to districts that operate high schools.

### **Attorney Consolidations**

As I did two years ago, I oppose the proposed attorney consolidation. In simple terms, as an independently elected constitutional officer, the legal opinions and rule promulgation of the Department of Public Instruction should not be subject to the review and approval of any governor's administration, now or in the future. I would appreciate your support in either deleting this proposal or exempting DPI from the consolidation.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I strongly believe in local control and trust school boards to make the right decisions for their children. School boards currently operate under more fiscal restrictions than any other unit of local government. We all know the importance of PK-12 education. We all know that investments today in education will pay big dividends in the future for our state.

In conclusion, I hope the committee will support much of the governor's budget proposal so that we all continue to make education our No.1 priority.

We have a long and rich progressive tradition in Wisconsin that has always appreciated the importance of putting our children on the path to success early in life. We know that quality education can lead us to the future economic success and security of our state.

Again, thank you for your time today. I and my staff would now be able to answer any questions you may have.

###

---

*Elizabeth Burmaster is the elected state superintendent of public instruction.*

**NOTES:** A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available for download on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at < <http://dpi.wisconsin.gov/eis/vm-media.html> >. An electronic copy of this testimony is available at < [http://www.dpi.wi.gov/sprntdnt/pdf/2007\\_jfc.pdf](http://www.dpi.wi.gov/sprntdnt/pdf/2007_jfc.pdf) >.